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ABSTRACT

This publication examines the growing trend toward early high school graduation, describes some of the characteristics and attitudes of early graduates, and discusses possible administrative responses to the increasing popularity of early graduation. Much of the discussion is based on the results of a school survey taken during the 1974-75 school year. The survey showed that 53.7 percent of American public high schools currently provide by policy for early graduation, and that the percentage of early graduates rose from 2.2 percent of the class of 1971 to 7.7 percent of the class of 1974. Most early graduates were successful, well-adjusted students who decided to graduate early for a wide variety of reasons. More than two-thirds of early graduates were female, and most graduated one semester ahead of their class. Three years after graduation, only 9 percent of 1972 early graduates felt they would have been better off to graduate with their class. Implications for school administrators of the trend toward early graduation are discussed, and the early graduation policies of seven high schools throughout the United States are described briefly. (JG)

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The Practitioner

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Early Graduation

Gaining Popularity

Early graduation from high school is increasing. More and more students are seeking to graduate before completing the twelfth year. Regardless of the student's objective, whether it be college entrance, immediate employment, interim work experience, brief "respite," travel, or whatever, graduating ahead of one's class has attracted large numbers of youth.

Over the past five years there has been a dramatic growth in the incidence of early graduation. According to a survey during the 1974-75 school year conducted jointly by ERS and NASSP, the percentage of early graduates (of the total graduates) rose from a low 2.2 percent for the class of 1971 to a significant 7.7 percent for the class of 1974 in public secondary schools.* The comparable figures for private secondary schools are 0.7 percent and 3.0 percent, respectively. The data showing this more than threefold increase for both public and private schools came from a random sample of 1,100 secondary schools, with an 87 percent return of the completed questionnaire.

The survey revealed that 53.7 percent of the reporting public high schools and 36 percent of the private high schools currently provide, by policy, for early graduation. Thus, opportunities for students to graduate early have become more common than uncommon in public high schools across the nation.

A New Idea?

Early graduation is an old mannequin dressed in new clothing. During the 1930s and 1940s, midyear graduation was common in a number of the larger cities. Also, periodic attempts to accelerate gifted high school students toward college extend from the recent sputnik era back to the early days of Harvard College, where a 16-year-old freshman was rather common.

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* See *Early Graduation from High School: Policy and Practice*, Educational Research Service, Inc., Suite 1012, 1815 N. Fort Myer Dr., Arlington, Va. 22209

The conditions of the present popularity of early graduation, however, differ from earlier eras. Current pressure to graduate early comes primarily from students, not from statesmen, philosophers, scholars, parents, or even college admission officers. The growing independence of youth, the accelerated maturation, the erosion of family control, the social sophistication, the new legal prerogatives, and the strong desire of youth to gain contact with the adult world, all contribute to the pressure for early graduation.

Many youth, while generally attracted to their teachers and their schools, still begin to feel unsettled as they approach the twelfth year.* Simply stated, they sense that the school is isolated; that classrooms and textbooks, alone, do not provide a broad enough set of experiences. They desire greater responsibility, mature intellectual challenges, and a firm contact with the working world of adults. If these contacts cannot be gained within the context of the senior year, then early graduation is sought as a road to that contact.

Although some students still seek early graduation to telescope the long years of anticipated college work, the incompleteness of the later high school years apparently is the prime motivating factor today in most students' opting for early graduation. So, while early graduation is not new in the world of secondary education, the circumstances and motivations certainly are changed from prior decades.

A new look at the early graduate of the 1970s is needed, therefore, to determine whether early graduation is worthwhile or is just another passing fad. The dwindling college enrollments, of course, bring a sense of urgency to the question.

Profile of the Early Graduate

The NASSP-ERS study found that the early graduate during the period of 1970 to 1974 was generally a successful secondary school student. High school principals reported the grades of their early graduates to be as follows:

GRADES	PUBLIC SCHOOL	PRIVATE SCHOOL
Excellent	13.0%	31.5%
Good	47.2%	63.0%
Fair	7.7%	1.8%
Poor	0.9%	-
Mixed group	27.3%	3.7%
No response	3.9%	-

* Bailey, Lois, *The 12th Grade: A Critical Year.* National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va., 1975.

The early graduate's social adjustment during high school apparently was also satisfactory. Only 2.5 percent of the public school principals and none of the private school principals reported a "poor" adjustment. Evidently most students who experience serious difficulties at school simply leave rather than opt for early graduation.

NASSP followed up these data by sending a questionnaire to the early graduates of 1972 to determine the attitudes and opinions of these persons some three years after graduation from high school. Members of the class of 1972 were selected because they were by now sufficiently removed from graduation to gain a perspective on the entire question. Some 341 persons responded. By polling the graduates directly, valuable information could be collected, revealing their opinions about the nature of their high school and postsecondary school experiences.

Generally, few early graduates of 1972 were involved with student activities or athletics. They were somewhat more active in performing groups. The degree of participation of these students in school affairs is as follows:

CHART A

ACTIVITY or ORGANIZATION	DEGREE OF PARTICIPATION			
	None	Casual	Active	A Leader
Athletic teams or sports clubs	46%	30%	18%	5%
Student government or class officer	72%	18%	6%	4%
Performing groups — chorus, band, dramatics, etc.	55%	18%	22%	5%
Special interest clubs — chess, French, political, etc.	68%	19%	11%	2%
Vocationally-oriented groups — business, agriculture, electronics, etc.	76%	10%	10%	4%
Service-oriented groups — school, community, etc.	65%	18%	12%	5%
School publications — newspaper, yearbook, etc.	80%	9%	8%	3%

The early graduates confirmed the opinion of their principals about grades. Grades were good, but generally not excellent. The majority of students reported receiving B's, or about half B's and half C's while attending high school.

Thus, the profile of the typical early graduate emerges as a good but not excellent scholar, well adjusted socially but generally not involved in school affairs. Most early graduates are age 17 upon leaving high school, as well. Only a few early graduates leave school at age 16, none at age 15. In addition, the early graduate is more likely to be female than male by a ratio of 2.5 to 1.

The Decision to Graduate Early

By an overwhelming margin the decision to graduate early is a personal decision. Parents proved to be somewhat influential, but other individuals appear to be only marginally important. The early graduates of 1972 report these influences upon their decision to graduate early:

CHART B

PERSONS INFLUENCING DECISION	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Your Parents	42%	40%	18%
An Older Brother or Sister	84%	13%	3%
An Adult Relative (other than parents)	92%	6%	2%
A Guidance Counselor	65%	23%	12%
A Teacher	76%	16%	8%
Principal or Assistant Principal	91%	6%	3%
Friends Your Own Age	61%	27%	12%
Yourself	4%	4%	92%

Note: Graduates were asked to rate all categories.

Not only do early graduates tend to make their own decisions about accelerated graduation, they also feel some three years later that the decision was correct. Only 16 students of the 341 early graduates polled stated that they should have waited to graduate with their class.

The motives given for desiring early graduation were quite mixed. Only 30 percent of the students stated that the "primary reason" for early graduation was to attend college. The second largest category, "tired of school," was listed by 13 percent of the graduates, while the third largest category, "to get a job," gained almost 13 percent of the responses. Other reasons less frequently mentioned were "time for personal interests," "join military service," "earn money for college," and "to get married."

Thus a picture forms of the psychology of early graduation — it is essentially a personal decision made for a variety of reasons but considered in retrospect as a good decision. This decision to graduate early is most typically made by students during the eleventh grade, relatively late in the high school career.

The early graduates' experiences quite closely parallel their intentions. One year after graduation some 32 percent of the class of 1972 were attending college full-time while 29 percent were employed full-time. Others were employed part-time, traveling, staying home, etc. Three years after graduation, in the spring of 1975, almost 27 percent of the early graduates were still attending college full-time. By that time, the third largest occupational category had become "homemaker."

Earning the Diploma

Most early graduates in 1972 completed the requirements for the diploma in seven semesters. Only a handful, 15 percent, graduated in six semesters or at the end of the junior year.

Almost half of the graduates earned the credits needed to graduate early by carrying additional subjects during the school year. Summer school courses were the second most popular approach to extra credit, followed at some considerable distance by evening school, college courses, vocational apprenticeships, correspondence courses, independent study, and examination. Only a few students earned credits through these six categories.

Most early graduates received their diplomas in June rather than in January when they completed the requirements. Evidently few schools offer midyear graduation ceremonies.

Viewpoints and Opinions

Most early graduates are doing what they thought they would be doing. Only 20 percent indicated that things turned out differently from what they anticipated during the three-year period following graduation.

In addition, the early graduates tended to be bullish about their progress to date. Almost half reported that their "progress or accomplishments" were greater than anticipated upon leaving high school. Only 9 percent indicated accomplishments to be less than anticipated.

This general success in fulfilling expectations may account for some of the skepticism expressed about the value of staying on to graduate with the regular class majority. Again, almost half of the early graduates surveyed indicated that their personal progress or accomplishments would have been less to date had they not graduated early. Only 5 percent felt that graduating with one's class would have enhanced progress.

Finally, the key question: "In your opinion, early graduation would be beneficial to what proportion of high school students?" The early graduates of 1972 responded as follows:

CHART C

PROPORTION OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM EARLY GRADUATION							
Categories given on questionnaire	None	Less than 10%	10% to 24%	25% to 49%	50% to 74%	75% to 89%	90% or more
Categories selected by respondents, by %	½%	13%	21%	22%	25%	9½%	9%

In giving advice, the early graduates tend to reflect a moderate position on early graduation, generally agreeing that it would benefit more than 10 percent of the student population, but certainly not all students. Most of the early graduates responding to this question, it should be remembered, graduated only one semester ahead of their class. They had departed from the traditional school pattern, but not radically so.

We Thought You Would Never Ask!

The early graduates of 1972 offered some specific advice to all high school students considering early graduation. By consensus, the importance of having an objective transcends all other matters. Whether the objective be to continue schooling, to get a job, or whatever, emphasis is placed upon identifying and working toward a recognized objective.

In sum, the early graduates say,

> Don't just "get out" of school and float from one thing to the next. If no immediate objective is in mind, stay in school and finish with your class. The additional time may help you come to some important decision. Make the final decision based on your own individual, personal choice. Seek all the advice possible — from parents, teachers, counselors, friends — but in the end, make your own decision.

The graduates also acknowledge certain positive and negative dimensions to early graduation. They considered early graduation as beneficial to the mature student with specific plans, and they liked the opportunity to study "in depth" at an earlier age. At the same time, the early graduates stated that friends and social activities were missed, and that adjustment to the post high school life can be difficult unless a clear purpose is held.

This All Means...

Early graduation is not likely to be a passing fad. Considering its strong endorsement by those with recent experience, and the increasing numbers of short term graduates, the popularity of early graduation probably will continue.

School administrators, however, should not stand by idly watching the growing parade. Rather, some initiatives should be taken to provide students with broader opportunities for learning than currently exist in many secondary schools. Those students who have exhausted the resources of the high school should look beyond the campus to new challenges in the world. At the same time, however, secondary schools must reassess their curricula to be certain that the older student has access to imaginative and extensive resources while enrolled in high school. Opportunities for learning must extend beyond the classroom into the community and into college level work.

An educational program responsive to the requirements of the older student today would include many of these features:

- ✓ An extensive offering of elective courses based upon student interests and available by semester or quarter.
- ✓ Broad opportunities to learn in a community setting, with adults, through work experience and volunteer service.
- ✓ A Senior Option, the opportunity for concentrated work on a specific project, carefully planned and evaluated.
- ✓ Enrollment in college work for college credit while still attending high school. The courses may be taught on the high school campus or at a nearby college or university.
- ✓ The opportunity to "stop out" one semester, with parental approval and for a legitimate purpose, prior to graduation.
- ✓ A "planning and brokering" service that identifies, locates, and arranges new learning opportunities for older students as the need materializes.
- ✓ Arrangements for a thorough observation of careers on location in the community.
- ✓ The development of academic programs with integrated field experiences.
- ✓ Exchange programs with other schools, preferably those of a composition different from the home school.
- ✓ The development, in larger systems, of specialized schools or subschools for specific career fields; i.e., health professions, fine arts, engineering professions, computer services, etc.

Options such as these will provide for many students the kind of experiences they now seek. Schools should arrange a broad base of experiential and applied learning to complement a traditional emphasis upon the vicarious and abstract. A proper balance is needed. Also, new opportunities should be allowed for the greater intellectual stimulation of college courses.

The question is not one of just hanging on to high school students. The question, rather, is one of being sufficiently adroit to recognize the educational requirements of older students today and then of taking the initiative to reshape the educational program to meet those requirements.

Early Graduation Ad Infinitum

The particularly precocious student always will sprint beyond the boundaries of the finest secondary school program. If that student seeks early entrance to higher education or to a job, then early graduation is not only fitting, it is proper. Schools always should allow an accelerated pace for the particularly talented or ambitious student. If such students are to be served well, then a clear policy of early graduation is required.

Typically, those schools who report a wide variety of opportunities for seniors to learn also have formed policies and procedures which allow early graduation. In effect, these schools deal from a position of strength, confident that alternatives other than early graduation will be selected by most students.

The conditions for approving early graduation vary widely, however. They range from routine applications signed by the parent to petitions which require the approval of the school office and of the [illegible] as early as the second semester of the ninth grade followed by student-parent-counselor conferences. Other schools define early graduation simply as exceptions to a four-year attendance requirement. Yet other schools require a certain grade point average for approval of early graduation.

To Illustrate

Good examples of the various approaches to early graduation are illustrated by these policy summaries:

Fountain Valley High School, Fountain Valley, Calif. 92708
Paul G. Berger, Principal

Fountain Valley offers a flexible program of early graduation. The school operates on a quarter basis. Students may graduate upon completing three years or any quarter thereafter. Requests are processed through the counselors with final approval coming from the principal. Students desiring to graduate at 3 or 3¼ years must have formulated clear and concise plans for future education or employment.

Credits toward early graduation may be earned through a variety of alternative school opportunities, vocational educational programs, work experience, adult education programs, night school, summer school and independent study. A maximum of 10 credits (two courses) per semester can be earned outside of the "regular" curriculum. A total of 210 semester credits (one course weekly, five times a week, for a semester is worth five credits) is required for graduation. Graduation ceremonies are held in June for all graduates of that school year. Approximately one quarter or an average of 250 to 300 students graduate prior to the fourth quarter of the fourth year.

Students requiring more than four years to obtain the required number of credits may continue in school taking only those courses needed to make up a deficit. Students previously excused from attendance for a quarter due to particular circumstances may make up the time missed. All requirements must be completed in five years.

Joliet East High School, Joliet, Illinois 60433
Leroy Leslie, Principal

Students desiring early graduation must complete 17 credits in either 3 or 3½ years. Students, with parental approval, apply through their counselor for permission to graduate early; the principal is the final approving authority. Students wishing to complete school in three years must present a definite and comprehensive plan for their future before approval is granted.

Additional credits needed to graduate early are acquired through a variety of methods: summer school, independent contracts, vocational apprenticeships, cooperative work-study programs, and courses at Joliet Junior College. The school operates on an extended school day from eight a.m. to eleven p.m. Students generally take the required courses during the "normal" school day, but may also enroll in courses during the evening school phase of the extended school day with approval. The school has approximately 80 early graduates per year.

Assumption High School, Napoleonville, Louisiana 70390
James D. Blanchard, Principal

Early graduation is authorized for all students after completion of twenty units. Students may graduate after 3 years or 3½ years of attendance. Those graduating after 3½ years may receive their diploma immediately or wait until the commencement in June. Once requirements are completed, students may not participate in extracurricular activities.

The principal is the final approving authority. The student and parents request early graduation initially through the guidance department. Additional credits needed to graduate early may be gained through correspondence courses, agricultural and business cooperative education programs, or college courses at Nichols State University; but are mainly acquired in an extensive summer school operated by the district. The average number of early graduates is sixty per year.

Monte Vista High School, Danville, California 94526
Sam S. Zackheim, Principal

Monte Vista High School operates a comprehensive and flexible program with 86 percent of the graduates going on to college. An average of eighty students per year graduate early, of these, thirty graduate in three years with the rest graduating in 3½ years. Of the thirty graduating in three years, almost all are in an advanced academic program.

Students must acquire a minimum of 220 units to graduate (one year-long course normally equals ten units). Additional credits can be acquired in a variety of ways — in summer school, in adult night school, in community college, at the University of California (Berkeley), in vocational centers and through a large independent study program. The principal is the final approval authority on all requests. Requests normally are approved because of a school philosophy that supports early graduation if desired by students and parents. Students who change their minds or fail to achieve their objectives are accepted back into the "traditional" pattern.

Lakeview High School, Battle Creek, Michigan 49015
Robert M. Ward, Principal

Lakeview High School authorizes early graduation after 3½ years of high school but not after 3 years. Students graduating early carry six courses a year for 3½ years. They may decide to graduate early as late as a month before the end of their seventh semester.

Twenty credits are required for early graduation. Means to acquire additional credit for early graduation include enrollment in the vocational education center which provides for coöp jobs, approved employment up to four hours, college course work at Kellogg Community College, or any combination of the above. The program is open to all students.

The average number of early graduates for the school years 1972-73 and 1973-74 had been 85. For 1974-75, however, the number dropped to 25. This decrease occurred because of a tight job market and expanded programs at the school. Early graduates can participate in extracurricular affairs designated as senior programs, but may not participate in day-to-day activities at school.

Annapolis Senior High School, Annapolis, Maryland 21401
Richard Ensor, Principal

Students may graduate early if they have demonstrated clearly in school a scholastic aptitude or vocational readiness, if there is a financial need for early entry into the labor market, or if health or family concerns would be served by completing educational requirements early.

Students must apply in writing, with parental approval, prior to course selection for grade 11 if they desire to complete their program in 3 years or 3 years and a summer, or prior to course selection for grade 12 if they are to complete their program in 3½ years. The principal reviews and recommends approval or disapproval and forwards the request to the Area Director (superintendent level) for a final decision.

Additional credits may be taken in approved summer school, in limited individualized programs or additional day courses at the high school. Also, students can be enrolled in one or two classes at the Anne Arundel Community College in advanced work not offered at the high school. Students may be admitted early to certain colleges or other approved postsecondary schools and then graduate from high school at the end of the successful completion of the first year of the college or school. The average number of early graduates per year is 50 or 60.

Kirkwood High School, Kirkwood, Missouri 63122
Donald W. Duchek, Principal

Graduation from high school in less than four years is authorized by the principal. Students to earn the diploma must make a written commitment outlining the proposed experience in one of four areas: college, vocational school, on-the-job training, or work. Students shall present

evidence of fulfillment of the commitment prior to the issuance of a diploma. Students graduate with their original class, or later if the commitment takes longer to fulfill.

Commitments for students shall consist of one of the following:

- For college or university work, the student must be enrolled for a minimum of twelve semester hours and maintain continuous attendance.
- For technical or trade school, the student must successfully complete a specified, approved program or else maintain attendance and show evidence of success for a period of time equal to the time missed in high school.
- For on-the-job training or specialized military service, the student must successfully complete the apprenticeship or training or show evidence of success as determined by the supervisor for a time equivalent to the number of days expected at school.
- For work, the student must verify continuous employment for the equivalent of 528 hours for one semester with an acceptable employer.

This *Practitioner* was developed by Bernard Davis and Scott Thomson of the NASSP staff. Research for the report was conducted by David Stanard and Scott Thomson. Copies of the questionnaire sent to early graduates together with the tallies for each item may be obtained by writing to NASSP's Office of Research, 1904 Association Dr., Reston, Va. 22091.

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